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THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

BY HJALMAR BERGSTRÖM

ADAPTED FOR THE AMERICAN STAGE BY

EDWIN BJÖRKMAN







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[Boston,  
Little, Brown, and company,  
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### *Characters*

MISS JESSICA BROWN, "who paints"

MISS BANG, "who sings"

MISS ANNIE NEWMAN } sisters, trained to nurse the idle  
MISS MOLLIE NEWMAN } rich

MISS HENRIETTA GADDING, "from the Embassy"

MISS HELEN FRICK, who not only paints but lives by it

MISS VAN KIRK, also a trained nurse, but formerly "on  
the stage"

JOSEPH

A MAID

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## THE BIRTHDAY PARTY

*As the curtain rises, Miss Brown is seen standing in the center of the room watching Joseph, who is on his knees before the fireplace, trying to get a fire started. Then a maid enters, carrying a tray with a bottle of Chartreuse and some glasses.*

MISS BROWN (*pointing to the little round table*). Ici, s'il vous plaît. (*The maid puts the tray on the table and disappears, whereupon Miss Brown turns her attention to Joseph again*) Est-ce qu'il brûle maintenant, Joseph?

JOSEPH. Comment, Madame?

MISS BROWN (*essaying another form of construction*). Est-ce — qu'il — Est-ce qu'il fera chaud?

JOSEPH. Chaud? Oui, Madame — dans cinq minutes. [*He goes out.*]

[*Miss Brown gives a final touch to the tea things on the table. When she hears the bell ring in the hallway, she hastens to close the doors to the balcony which have been left open to let out the smoke from the fireplace. Then she goes to the entrance door and opens it.*]

BROWN. So glad to see you, Miss Bang.

BANG (*coming into the room*). How are you, my dear Miss Brown? It was so nice of you to ask me!

BROWN. Let me help you with your things. We'll hang them right here.

BANG. Thank you. (*Placing her coat on the rack in the corner*) And they call this Spring!

BROWN. Yes — nothing but rain.

BANG. It was the hardest thing to get hold of a cab.

BROWN. I suppose so.

BANG (*clearing her throat*). And to have to breathe this dreadful raw air!



BROWN. Yes, yes — it gives me a bad conscience to think that I have dragged you all the way from Auteuil. — Really, for the sake of your voice, you ought not to have come.

BANG. Oh, you can't stay at home fourteen days on a stretch merely because you happen to be a singer — and, of course, I have to go out to visit my *Maestro*.

BROWN. You are still satisfied with him?

BANG. He is magnificent!

BROWN. Won't we have a chance of hearing you in public soon?

BANG (*evasively*). That's quite out of the question for a while yet. (*Begins to look around in a manner showing that she has never been in the room before*) What a nice place!

BROWN. Yes, it is n't bad.

BANG (*at the balcony doors*). How funny! If that isn't the towers of Saint Sulpice!

BROWN. You did n't expect that down in the street.

BANG (*looking around again*). Artists always know how to make themselves comfortable. [*Turning to the picture on the easel.*]

BROWN. No, you mustn't look at that.

BANG. Why not?

BROWN. Oh, well — the conditions were so unfavorable.

BANG (*just to say something*). The perspective is excellent, I think. (*Looking at one of the sketches over the table on the right*) That's very — cunning.

BROWN. Barely started, you know.

BANG. Have you nothing finished on hand?

BROWN. No, hardly anything but studies and sketches —

BANG. Will you have anything at the *Salon* this year?

BROWN (*with the same evasiveness shown by Miss Bang a little while before*). Not this time, I fear.

BANG (*catching sight of the preparations on the big table*). Is it going to be a real party?

BROWN. Only a few friends.

BANG. And what a lot of beautiful flowers!



BROWN (*who has kept an ear toward the hallway*). That's the Misses Newman, I am sure. Pardon me — (*She hurries to open the door while Miss Bang studies the sheet music on top of the piano*) Hello, girls — it's perfectly fine of you to venture out in weather like this.

MOLLIE. The street-car was at its best, of course.

ANNIE. We had to stand up all the way.

BROWN. And then walk the rest of it, I suppose — you nice old things!

ANNIE. Not a 'bus in sight, of course.

MOLLIE. Happy birthday, Jessica!

ANNIE. And many more of them, Jessica!

[*Hands her a bunch of flowers.*]

BROWN. Thanks, thanks! Oh, my, but they are wonderful! Thanks ever so much.

MOLLIE (*starting to hang up her things on the rack*). They are from both of us, of course.

BROWN. You are a couple of dears!

[*Starts to put the flowers on the piano.*]

ANNIE (*in the act of hanging up her coat*). Better see where they came from —

BROWN (*discovering the florist's name on the wrappings*).

Are you crazy, girls! — Really, I don't know what to say to you. [*She puts the flowers on the top of the piano.*]

BANG (*still devoting herself to the music on the piano*). Are you having a birthday, Miss Brown?

BROWN. Yes — unfortunately, I might almost say.

BANG. I had no idea, of course — and so all I can offer is a wish for many happy returns.

BROWN. Many thanks! But I have forgotten to introduce — These are two old friends of mine — we used to play together as children — Miss Mollie Newman, Miss Annie Newman — trained nurses now, and terribly in demand — Miss Bang, the concert singer.

MOLLIE. We have heard of you — they tell us you have a remarkable voice.

BANG. Oh, that's going too far.

ANNIE. I think I heard something about your giving a recital soon.

BANG. N-no — not just yet.

BROWN. Won't you please take off your hats? This is not a call merely.

ANNIE. Can we put them on the bed in there?

BROWN. Yes, indeed.

*[All the visitors take off their hats and put them on the bed inside the alcove.]*

BROWN. Tell me — do you find it cold in here?

BANG. No, it's just right.

BROWN. I had to have a real fire to-day. The oil stove is all right for heat, but it does n't exactly — give the right kind of atmosphere. Come and sit down by the fire now — here, Miss Bang.

BANG. Thank you.

*[They seat themselves in front of the fireplace.]*

BROWN. Have you made up your minds where to spend the summer?

ANNIE. Looks like Ostend.

MOLLIE. We're in luck, Jessica. Our two "fatties", as we call them — (*to Miss Bang*) that's the cases my sister and I have on hand — both of them are going to Ostend and want us to go with them.

BROWN. That *is* luck.

BANG. The air is splendid, they tell me.

ANNIE. I can't say I fancy Ostend.

MOLLIE. Annie has some rather painful recollections from that place.

BANG. Indeed?

ANNIE. I spent a summer there looking after an idiot who had water on his brain.

BANG. Horrible!

MOLLIE. Worse than that — in spite of all the water on his brain, this idiot went and fell in love with Annie so that it became impossible for her to stay.

BANG. Well, if I ever.

ANNIE. I should prefer to go home this Summer. But Mollie is throwing fits about Ostend — high society is her weakness, you know.

MOLLIE. Listen to her. No, my girl, if any one of us suffers from snobbishness, that's you, and not me.

ANNIE. As you please, but — you *are* rather fond of swell people, and particularly of swell gentlemen.

MOLLIE. Lord, girl — as if I had n't got beyond *that*!

ANNIE. Where are you bound for, Jessica?

BROWN. Brittany is tempting me sorely.

ANNIE. Again?

BROWN. If I only could get some one to go along.

MOLLIE. Isn't Miss Frick going to Brittany?

ANNIE. Why, that fits in splendidly.

BROWN. Look here, girls — please don't start talking of this when she gets here.

ANNIE. Don't you want her?

BROWN. You know how fond of her I am, but — (*turning to Miss Bang*) You are not acquainted with Miss Frick?

BANG. No.

BROWN. She is coming here — we studied together in the same art school, at home.

ANNIE. I hope you don't get scared when you see her.

BANG. Is she as ugly as that?

BROWN. She is a fine woman, and here in Paris it doesn't matter that she wears her hair short and uses stiff shirts and smokes enormous cigars — and behaves in general like a man. But in a little fishing village in Brittany — I have been with her once, and it won't happen again. I — I simply can't repeat what they said of us.

MOLLIE. I would n't mind that kind of thing a bit.

BROWN. You just try it, and see if you don't mind!  
(*Rising*) I guess it's time to start the tea-kettle — the rest must be coming soon, I am sure.

[*She lights the alcohol lamp, opens the tea-caddy and so on.*]

BANG. Have you thought of Ophelia Jones? I know she is looking for company.

BROWN (*busy with the tea things*). No, thanks.

BANG. But she is *so* nice.

BROWN. I haven't the least desire to act as foil for our sweet Ophelia. Her tricks are too well known. Every summer she picks out the ugliest girl in the American colony for her traveling companion.

ANNIE. But how can you say that, Jessica — I myself spent the Summer with her a couple of years ago!

BROWN (*after an ominous pause*). That — that must have been for lack of something better. And you yourself told me she was quite unbearable.

BANG. In what way?

BROWN. Oh, she can't put eyes on a male creature without losing her head.

ANNIE. Yes, that's perfectly true.

MOLLIE. I don't see *why* anybody should care.

BANG. Yes, of course, she is a little — behind the time.

BROWN. It's more than a self-respecting woman can stand.

ANNIE. Are *you* going anywhere this Summer?

[*To Miss Bang.*]

BANG. It depends on my *Maestro*. I'll stay in Paris as long as he does, and if he should decide to continue his lessons after he goes to the country, I'll go with him.

BROWN. Do you think Henrietta Gadding will come? I understand her noble Countess is still ailing.

MOLLIE. I don't know — I haven't seen her for ever so long.

BANG. Who's Miss Gadding?

ANNIE. Have you never been to a reception at the Embassy? No, that's right — they ceased before you came here. Miss Gadding is there as some sort of companion or governess.

BROWN. Don't you call her governess when she hears it, or you'll have your head taken off.

ANNIE. Well, what is she?

BROWN. A *friend of the family*, dear!

BANG. Isn't the Ambassador married to a French lady?



ANNIE. Yes, this time. It's his second venture, you know, and she is a real Countess — also a dreadfully hysterical creature, between you and me and the lamp-post. The Ambassador himself is most amiable.

BROWN (*her attention still fixed on the door*). Here comes Miss Gadding. (*She goes to meet her, while the others rise and stir about a little*) Ah, there you are, Miss Gadding. So kind of you to come. And many thanks for the charming card you sent me.

GADDING. I don't like to desert old friends.

ANNIE. How's the Embassy, Miss Gadding, and how's yourself?

GADDING. Thank you — the Countess isn't worse at least.

MOLLIE. We were afraid you might not be able to get away.

GADDING. Mercy — I am my own master!

BROWN. You mustn't think Miss Gadding is *employed* by anybody.

GADDING. I have never been more free from obligations in all my life.

BROWN. Let me introduce — Miss Bang, the concert singer; Miss Henrietta Gadding.

GADDING. Are you one of the Richmond Bangs?

BANG. No — why?

BROWN. Miss Gadding is an F.F.V., you know — the rest of us are merely from Chicago.

GADDING (*with dignity*). I spent a long visit with them once — most *lovely* people — and they *are* one of the finest families in Richmond.

BANG. I'm sorry — I don't know them.

BROWN. Now old Frick and Miss Van Kirk are the only ones missing. I wonder why in the world they don't show up.

GADDING. Miss Van Kirk will be here soon. I met her passing the house with her little foster-daughter.

BROWN. Did she pass, you say?

GADDING. She called out to me that she would come in a moment. I suppose she was bringing the girl home from school.

BROWN. But why did n't she bring the girl along?

GADDING. I did n't quite catch what she said.

ANNIE. There's a head on that little thing.

MOLLIE. On Adelaide, you mean?

GADDING. What do you call her?

ANNIE. By her name, Adelaide.

GADDING. How funny!

BANG. Don't you know Beethoven's *Adelaide*?

GADDING. What is it?

MOLLIE. It's tremendous — (*trying to hum the melody*)

How does it go now?

BANG. You should hear my *Maestro* sing it — it's so beautiful that it hurts. It takes a Southerner to do it. (*Goes to the piano*) The passion of it — (*Sings*) "Adelaide! Adelaide!"

ANNIE. Please, sing all of it, Miss Bang!

MOLLIE (*almost simultaneously, ecstatically*). Oh, it's almost more than one can bear!

BANG. What am I thinking of? I who must n't sing anything but scales!

BROWN (*searching in the pile of sheet music*). Oh, won't you?

One little song! I have got the music here.

BANG. Please don't ask me! Even what I did just now was a gross breach of the rules.

ANNIE (*deeply impressed*). Of course, one must be terribly careful when one studies singing as — as it should be.

BANG. I can assure you that if the *Maestro* knew I had sung even those few notes — oh, Lord preserve us!

MOLLIE. Is he so very strict, your — master?

BANG. Worse than that — like a flaming volcano — from the South, you know.

GADDING. Yes, all that come from there are very hot-tempered, I hear. The Countess is also from the *Midi*.

BANG. But such temperament!

BROWN. Oh, here's Miss Frick now!

ANNIE (*to Miss Bang*). Can you hear her hawking (*imitating the sound*) — just like a man!



GADDING (*with severe disapproval*). And she — expectorates.  
BANG. She does?

GADDING. Yes, when she is smoking.

FRICK (*entering; to Miss Brown*). Hello, old girl. And a happy birthday to you!

BROWN. Hello, old top! So happy to see you!

FRICK (*handing Miss Brown a small package*). A little something — not worth speaking of.

BROWN (*opening the package*). What can it be? — oh, just what I thought — genuine *Fleur de Lis*.

MOLLIE. In a cut-glass bottle.

BROWN (*takes out the stopper and sniffs at the bottle*). It reminds me of somebody — who is it now?

ANNIE. Let me — (*smells the bottle*) Yes, it makes me think of somebody, too.

FRICK. It ought to. Can't you get it?

MOLLIE (*who in the meantime has got hold of the bottle*). Wait a moment.

GADDING. It's very pleasing.

MOLLIE. I know — Miss Van Kirk!

FRICK. Good guess! It's the perfume she always uses. (*To Miss Brown as she catches sight of Miss Bang*). Won't you introduce me.

BROWN. I beg your pardon! Miss Bang, the concert singer — Miss Frick, artist.

FRICK. Frick is right, but not the "artist." My profession is to copy pictures.

BROWN. Miss Frick is famous for her wonderfully faithful copies of some of the greatest masterpieces in the Louvre.

FRICK. Stuff and exaggeration! I make my living by copying old Masters — sort of grave-robbing, you know. (*To Miss Brown*) You have asked Miss Van Kirk, have n't you?

BROWN. Yes, she ought to be here any moment.

GADDING. She is on her way — I met her coming here.

FRICK. There is something wonderfully restful about that woman — an air that sets her apart.

BROWN. Yes?

FRICK. As if she had something we lacked.

MOLLIE (*dryly*). Luck, I suppose.

FRICK. Happiness, rather — and balance and — (*a little sharply*) a certain contented sweetness.

ANNIE. Old Frick growing sentimental!

BROWN. There is the child.

FRICK. Perhaps — well, anyhow, I am quite stuck on her.

GADDING. I suppose she was rather pretty in her youth!

FRICK. Pretty? She was too attractive for words!

ANNIE. They tell me she looked splendid on the stage.

BANG. Oh, has she been an actress?

FRICK. Yes, she had a try at it.

BROWN. I don't think anybody here has seen her act.

FRICK. I have.

BANG. Why did n't she keep it up?

FRICK. Because she had no talent. Just looks, and nothing else. The best she could do was to quit.

BANG. I understand she is doing very well over here.

BROWN. Yes, all the richest people are fighting for her.

You see, she has had the very best training.

ANNIE (*with ill-concealed envy*). And a lot of pull to start with — that's the principal secret.

MOLLIE (*in the same tone*). Exactly!

FRICK (*to Miss Bang*). Miss Van Kirk makes from fifteen to twenty thousand francs a year. And she is very sensible. She puts away as much as she can.

BROWN. Hush — here she comes now.

MISS VAN KIRK (*showing, as she enters, that she has been hurrying*). How are you, Miss Brown. And a happy birthday!

BROWN. I am so glad to see you, dear. And I don't know how to thank you for the beautiful flowers you sent me!

VAN KIRK. Pardon me for being so late, but I had to take Adelaide from school first.

BROWN. Why didn't you bring her along? She is such a little darling.

VAN KIRK. She had a date with one of her friends — and so, you know, *we* were not in it.

*[She exchanges greetings with the other guests.]*

BROWN. You know everybody but Miss Bang — the concert singer. May I introduce Miss Van Kirk?

ANNIE. I hear Adelaide is doing fine at school.

VAN KIRK. Yes, indeed — she has her name on the roll of honor.

GADDING. It's a noble deed, Miss Van Kirk, to take care of that poor little orphan.

VAN KIRK (*eagerly, with a slight touch of embarrassment*).

Why, it is nothing but a pleasure.

MOLLIE (*a wee bit sourly*). And when one can afford it.

BROWN. Won't you please be seated.

VAN KIRK. How nice and warm it is in here.

BROWN (*at the table, busying herself with the tea things*). Now, the tea will be ready in a jiffy. Oh, say, Annie, put some wood on the fire, won't you!

*[Miss Annie looks after the fire and then seats herself in the chair farthest to the left and nearest to the fireplace; Miss Gadding picks the left sofa corner for herself and pulls out some knitting from the big bag she is carrying.]*

MOLLIE (*to Miss Brown*). Now I'll hand the cups around while you pour.

*[Miss Frick has been studying the sketch on the easel. Now she begins to examine the canvasses that stand on the floor with their backs to the room. Miss Mollie gives the first cup to Miss Gadding and the next two to Miss Bang and Miss Van Kirk, who stand talking in the center of the foreground.]*

VAN KIRK. Whom do you study with?

BANG. Professor Duberry.

VAN KIRK. Yes, he has a big reputation.

BANG (*with consecration*). Oh, he is marvelous!

BROWN. I think we might all sit down. Come on over here, Helen Frick.

*[When they have all seated themselves, they are grouped as follows from left to right: Miss Annie, Miss Bang, Miss*



*Gadding, Miss Brown, Miss Van Kirk, Miss Frick, Miss Mollie.*

GADDING. That's a remarkably good tea you have, Miss Brown.

BROWN. I get it from *Potin*.

MOLLIE. And those little cakes look delicious — I am going right at them, as you see.

BROWN. Please, help yourself!

ANNIE. Well, if it were not for the afternoon tea, I don't see how one could stand a Paris boarding-house at all.

BANG. It's not a pleasant form of existence.

BROWN. I have been thinking of getting away from this place.

ANNIE. Why take the trouble, my dear? I know them all — there's not the slightest difference between them.

GADDING. I think it ought to be quite agreeable to live where you can meet a lot of interesting people.

BROWN. Interesting people? Hysterical old women — that's the only kind of people you meet.

FRICK. You should do like me, children — get a room of your own and eat out.

BROWN. I have tried it — but an unescorted lady never gets decent attention from the waiters.

ANNIE. No, never!

FRICK. It's your own fault. When you want a plate of soup and a piece of pastry, and drink water, and give the waiter a *sou* for tip, how the deuce can you expect him to care. I have never had anything to complain of.

ANNIE. It's the only time I really miss a man — when I go to a restaurant, I mean.

BANG. I am with you there. There is something elegant about the way a man gives his orders, and handles the waiters, and all that. I was watching my *Maestro* the other day —

GADDING. I think it's most enjoyable to eat out, but I have so few opportunities.

MOLLIE. Oh, my dear Miss Gadding, you don't know what

it means to live — you who move in high society and have an Embassy for your home. If you had to live in boarding-houses and dairy restaurants day in and day out for years — Gee, but I do envy you at times!

GADDING (*rather pleased, and yet unable to acquiesce*). And I have moments when I envy — what shall I call them? — the modern women, who have a profession of their own and can be *quite* independent.

MOLLIE. It's waste of time, Miss Gadding — there's nothing to that sort of independence.

GADDING. And I think it would be such a rare blessing to feel really useful — as a nurse, for instance.

ANNIE. You can bet there is nothing particularly blessed about the kind of thing we have to go through. Or what do *you* say, Miss Van Kirk?

VAN KIRK. It is still worse for the doctors, I should say.

MOLLIE. No, to have the gift of an artist — that's the ideal, I think. To have it like Jessica, for instance — economically independent, and with her art to fill up her life!

BROWN. You get tired of that, too.

GADDING. Yes, to be an artist — it makes your life so rich, does n't it?

BROWN (*with sudden bitterness*). In the old days old maids used to embroider — now they paint.

MOLLIE. Old maids — humph! Who's an old maid?

ANNIE. What an old-fashioned way of thinking, Jessica!

BROWN. I have no illusions left.

GADDING. But why shouldn't you?

BROWN. Do you know how old I am to-day?

ANNIE. I haven't given a thought to it.

MOLLIE. You want to brag of being the youngest, I suppose.

BROWN (*as if she hadn't heard the last remarks*). Forty years!

GADDING. That's incredible.

BROWN (*as before — with a strangely hard tonelessness*).

Forty years — neither more nor less!



MOLLIE (*perfunctorily*). I really thought you were much younger.

FRICK. Why did you tell, girl? It makes the rest of us seem so old of a sudden.

[*The resulting pause is fraught with varied emotions.*]

ANNIE. How time does run.

GADDING. What does it matter, I say, when you have something to keep you busy.

BROWN. Yes, when you have.

ANNIE. But you have, Jessica.

BROWN. Less and less. Do you think it's any fun to go on painting for twenty years without ever getting into an exhibition — not to talk of such a thing as selling.

MOLLIE. But you, Miss Bang, as a singer — what have you got to say? Does n't your song fill up your whole life? Is there a place in your soul for anything else?

BANG (*after some hesitation; a little stiffly*). I do enjoy taking lessons.

GADDING. Yes, but when you appear at a concert — I can imagine nothing more wonderful — to stand there and sing your heart out.

BANG (*more stiffly than ever*). I — I haven't tried it yet. (*Deep silence, suddenly broken when Miss Bang turns to Miss Van Kirk*) Why did you leave the stage, Miss Van Kirk — did you not enjoy it?

VAN KIRK (*with a deprecatory smile*). Oh, yes, but I don't think the public did.

FRICK. Which means that we have reached the pleasant stage where nobody needs to be jealous of anybody else.

ANNIE. Bully for you!

BROWN. That's so like you, old top! You know how to look things in the face without —

FRICK (*interrupting*). Anybody can do that. I am just as well off as any other mill-hand. Now I have stood twelve years in the same room in the Louvre and copied the same darned old picture — I might just as well do it at home without looking at the original — there isn't a brush

stroke in it that I don't know by heart. But it keeps me alive.

BROWN. So we don't have to be jealous of you, either.

FRICK. Do you mind if I light a cigar?

BROWN. Oh, I had quite forgotten — Here are cigarettes — Let's have a real good time now!

*[The cigarettes are passed round and everybody lights up — except Miss Gadding. In the meantime Miss Frick has pulled out a big cigar from somewhere and lighted it with all the loving care of a devotee.]*

BROWN. Put a little more on the fire, Annie, while I serve the liqueur. Shall I turn on the lights?

SEVERAL (at once). No, no, — it's so cosy as it is!

BROWN. How about you, Miss Gadding?

GADDING. I knit just as well in the dark.

*[Miss Annie freshens up the fire; Miss Brown serves the cordial.]*

BANG. And it is still raining.

GADDING. Yes, isn't it awful!

MOLLIE. What's that to all of you? I have to go back to my patient to-night — way out in one of the suburbs.

BANG. It's so nice to look at the fire when it flames up like that.

GADDING. It would be a pity to turn on the light — one can see to do anything here.

BROWN. Well, girls, here's to all of you!

FRICK. No, here's to the birthday child — and may she live and prosper forty years more!

EVERYBODY (on their feet). Hear, hear! — Three cheers! Long live Jessica!

ANNIE (when at last quiet has returned and all are seated again).

I remember perfectly well when you celebrated your twentieth birthday, Jessica.

MOLLIE. So do I — what fun we had!

ANNIE. And what silly little fools we were!

BROWN (with a little sigh). Yes — yes. And little did we think then that we should be sitting here twenty years later, all three of us, in this rotten old hole in Paris.

ANNIE. Paris at that time — gee, what a dream!

BROWN. It's punk to get old!

*[She tries to get out her handkerchief without being seen.]*

GADDING. I wonder if it is so bad?

BROWN. For a single woman — God knows it is! *(She wipes her eyes brazenly; Miss Van Kirk pats her left hand sympathetically; Miss Brown smiles gratefully through her tears)* I don't care if you laugh at me — but I am going to be just as sentimental as I please on my birthday.

GADDING. Of course, I do feel a little queer when my birthday comes around — but I thought I was the only one who got that sense of emptiness.

ANNIE *(stirring the fire restlessly with the poker)*. What do you think the rest of us can expect from the future?

BROWN. You did the reasonable thing, Miss Van Kirk, by getting hold of a child while it was still time — *we* are too old to do even that.

VAN KIRK *(very quietly)*. It is a great pleasure to have something waiting for you when you wake up in the morning.

GADDING. That's what I always say — it's the children I miss, not the man.

FRICK. That's an old story, my friend, and every old maid wants you to believe it.

MOLLIE. Right you are! Let's be honest, children — let's be honest for once. I would rather be a deserted wife or a "fallen" girl than an old maid. To be nothing but an old maid — it means emptiness ahead and emptiness behind. Oh, no, we have been pretty stupid — that's all. And here's to wisdom!

*[She empties her glass.]*

ANNIE. Back up! Back up!

BANG *(almost simultaneously)*. Really, that's going too far!

MOLLIE. You don't like to admit it, of course. And you, Annie, can't fool me.

BROWN. All right, let's admit the emptiness ahead. But as for the emptiness behind — why, girls, we have at least a few — memories.



GADDING. That's what I always say — nobody can rob you of your memories.

FRICK (*having rid herself rather loudly of a troublesome piece of tobacco leaf*). Is that so? Well, give us his name.

GADDING (*pleased, proud and confused*). Never — never!

MOLLIE. Tut, tut, Miss Gadding — out with it! Or we'll think you were merely blowing.

GADDING. I — I'll give you ten names and let you guess at the right one.

FRICK. Mercy me — have you had ten proposals?

MOLLIE. Oh, she's a deep one.

GADDING. No, I didn't mean it that way. What I said was that I would let you guess from ten names. But you mustn't guess aloud, you know.

FRICK. The plot is getting thicker and thicker.

GADDING. On the contrary, my dear Miss Frick. Are there not ten members of the Cabinet?

BANG. Something like that, I believe.

GADDING (*with a self-satisfied chuckle*). He's one of them.

ANNIE. So you might almost have been a member of the Cabinet!

GADDING (*carried away by the rare pleasure of having everyone's attention centered on herself*). Do you know what he always used to say to me? — You have noticed my very small head, I suppose? — He said always: "I should give anything to know what's going on in that little head."

[*Her last words are uttered with a sound lying half-way between sob and laughter; then she blows her nose in her handkerchief and resumes her knitting.*]

MOLLIE. Annie might have been "the Colonel's lady."

ANNIE (*with pretended fierceness*). Shut up, Mollie.

MOLLIE. But she didn't care.

BROWN. You, with your figure, would have been well suited for an officer's wife.

FRICK. A regular *Madame le Général*!

ANNIE (*forgetting her resentment*). He is a general now, for that matter.



BROWN. Lord, Annie — you don't mean —

ANNIE. Don't you dare, Jessica!

BROWN. I'll bite off my tongue rather. But, I never!  
Why, that's great. It's good enough for a toast. Here's  
to *Madame le Général*!

FRICK. I want to drink to the Cabinet Lady — might have  
been.

BANG. And you, Miss Brown — supposing —

BROWN. Oh, I am the hostess.

ANNIE. Don't be so modest, Jessica. I know.

BROWN. You just try, Annie, and — Tit for tat!

ANNIE. No names, but — here's to *Madame le Professeur*.

FRICK. You don't tell me! Why, Jessica — one of the  
chaps at the art school? I bet you, it was him with the  
wooden leg.

BROWN. If any one of you says another word —

BANG (*suddenly, with conviction*). Yes, indeed, professors  
are so captivating!

[*General outburst of merriment followed by a slightly painful  
pause.*]

MOLLIE. Well, say what you like, but there is *something* we  
have missed.

BROWN. I think everybody should follow your example,  
Miss Van Kirk, — while it is still time. It would be a  
compensation at least.

MOLLIE. Bothering about other people's children —  
no-o!

ANNIE. Why not, Mollie?

MOLLIE. Oh — it would be like having the headache of  
somebody else's jag. Not for me!

FRICK. Spoken like — a man!

MOLLIE (*with intense feeling and speaking to herself rather than  
to the others*). No, there's only one way — to think of  
oneself, and let the rest go hang. What else can be ex-  
pected of an old maid. Oh, how stupid we have been —  
and now it's too late!

[*She flings her half-smoked cigarette into the fire.*]

GADDING. But, my dear Miss Newman, that's quite another matter —

MOLLIE (*without listening to her*). Suppose we could live our lives over again, girls — do you think I'd care a hang for reputation and such things? No, I'd suit myself, no matter what happened. Gossip — what of it? Do you think it's any worse than ridicule, or pity, or, at the best, polite contempt?

FRICK. You are right, girl, and I think the more of you for saying it.

GADDING. Of course, you read about that kind of thing in the books —

ANNIE. And yet you haven't done it yourself, Miss Frick.

FRICK. And why — why, do you think? (*With a sudden break in her voice*) Oh, there is n't one of you I don't envy.

ANNIE. Us — why?

FRICK. All of you. (*Deeply moved*) Once in your life at least — perhaps only for a moment — some man's eyes have rested upon you in such a way that — that you can never forget it. And that's a joy I have never known.

BROWN (*after a brief, tense pause*). But we who know you, Helen — we think an awful lot of you. Is there no consolation at all in that?

FRICK. Yes, dear Jessica. — It's kind of you to let me share a little of your happiness — and I am thankful for it.

ANNIE. Our crippled, anemic happiness.

FRICK (*still showing strong emotion*). You don't know what you are talking of. If you smile at a child, it smiles back at you. If I stare, it shrieks with fright. No, you don't know how much happiness you have after all. — Were I like one of you, I should adopt ten children, if I had to pick them out of the gutter! You, Miss Van Kirk, you are the lucky one!

VAN KIRK. Yes, I think I am. And more — more than you imagine.

ANNIE (*dreamily*). She is such a sweet little thing, that girl of yours.

VAN KIRK. If you only knew — (*There is something in her tone that makes everybody turn toward her with wrapt attention*) If I told, then you would envy me.

FRICK (*almost in a whisper*). Tell us!

VAN KIRK. You all like Adelaide, I think —

ANNIE. Yes, as I said before, she —

VAN KIRK. I have not adopted her — she is my child — my own child! Now you know! It was silly of me to hide it, I think. It was like denying my own child — denying that she was mine. I am done with that. From now on I shall let the whole world know. Think of it — to have given birth to a child! It isn't happiness only — it's the great miracle — it's — Oh, there are no words to express it! And then *he* — he is neither a cabinet member nor a general — but what of it? He then and Adelaide now — and no emptiness ahead or behind. (*For a moment she is overcome by her emotions*) Yes, I am very, very happy! [*Long pause; no one dares to look at Miss Van Kirk — or at any one else.*]

FRICK. It has always seemed to me as if you radiated content and a sort of quiet happiness — now I can understand.

BROWN (*just to say something*). That's true.

[*Another pause.*]

ANNIE (*in the businesslike, every-day voice she might use in the presence of a dangerously ill patient*). I think we must be going, Mollie.

GADDING (*rising from the sofa*). S-so must I.

MOLLIE (*rising and putting her hands to her cheeks that are still red and burning*). What a lot of nonsense we have been talking!

[*All are now on their feet.*]

ANNIE. I think you'll have to turn on the light, Jessica, so we can sort out our baggage.

BROWN (*turning on the light*). Here you are.

[*Every face has a look as if it had been set in a mold, and all through the following scene no one dares to let her eyes meet*



*those of anybody else; Miss Van Kirk goes first to the rack and begins to put on her overclothing.*

MOLLIE (*turning to her sister in order to get away from the rack*).

Now I remember — we put our hats in there.

[*She and her sister go to the alcove and stay there while putting on their hats.*

BANG (*with a glance toward the window*). And it's still pouring.

GADDING (*stowing away her knitting and pulling the strings of the bag to close it*). I wish I were home — without being wet, I mean.

[*Miss Gadding drops her bag on the table and makes for the rack, followed by Miss Frick, who has lighted a cigarette; Miss Van Kirk passes them on her way down the stage to get her bag, which is lying on the big table; then she goes over to the table on the right where she is left entirely alone while pulling on her gloves.*

BANG (*making for the door*). Lord, how am I to get hold of a cab!

MOLLIE (*with a hatpin in her mouth*). I think at the square.

ANNIE. You'll get the 'bus there anyhow.

[*Miss Bang and the Misses Newman relieve Miss Frick and Miss Gadding at the rack.*

BROWN (*coming down to the big table*). Isn't this your bag, Miss Gadding?

GADDING. A thousand thanks — I had almost forgotten it.

[*The Misses Newman also come forward to give themselves a final scrutiny in the big mirror over the fireplace.*

FRICK (*turning up the collar of her coat that is cut like a man's; speaking in her ordinary brusque manner*). Nobody headed for a restaurant, I suppose?

BROWN (*in a tone of relief*). There speaks the inveterate bachelor.

BANG (*coming down stage*). Then we are all ready.

GADDING (*at the big table*). One minute, Miss Bang — gloves are so troublesome when they have been wet. There now!

FRICK (*opening the perfume bottle*). May I steal a drop, Jessica?



BROWN. Please — you don't have to ask that, do you?

*[Miss Frick pours a couple of drops on her handkerchief.]*

GADDING. Is everybody ready then? *(With a forced smile and a tone meant to indicate that it had not occurred to her until then)* One word before we part and go our various ways. — That about the cabinet member, you know — of course, it was nothing but a little fun.

BROWN. Of course!

BANG. I hope you don't think anybody.

ANNIE. And as for my colonel — I trust no one took him seriously.

BROWN. Heavens, Annie! Don't you think we know a joke when we hear it?

*[Everybody looks suddenly, automatically, at Miss Van Kirk, who is still standing by herself in the right forward corner, seemingly trying in vain to get her gloves buttoned. As she stands there, it is as if she had been stripped naked while all the rest remained properly clothed.]*

GADDING. Well, Miss Brown, that was a most enjoyable party.

MOLLIE. I think we have had a splendid time, Jessica.

ANNIE. Old maids can also have some fun, it seems.

BANG. Yes, thank heaven, one *can* get along without men, after all.

BROWN. Well, I should say so.

BANG. Good-by, then. You'll come and see me some day, won't you?

BROWN. Indeed — with pleasure.

*[All are ready, yet they don't leave. They seem to hesitate about something that is not clear to themselves. Suddenly Miss Bang goes up to Miss Van Kirk.]*

BANG *(in a tone of formal politeness that gives no clue whatever to her feelings or emotions)*. Are you going my way, Miss Van Kirk?

VAN KIRK. No, I have to go for my — my daughter.

FRICK *(somewhat more loudly and brusquely than usual)*.

Ta-ta, Jessica. Quite a party, I should say. And we'll meet Sunday, I suppose.

BROWN (*conducting her guests to the door*). I hope everybody gets home all right. (*Everybody departs, leaving Miss Brown alone on the stage; she turns around and stands for a moment staring into vacancy; then she shakes herself and goes to the piano where her eyes fall on the music she had picked out for Miss Bang; and again she stands immovable, silent, staring at nothing; at last her lips move and she utters the one word*) Adelaide! —

CURTAIN







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